



Type: Magazine Article

An Expedition to Central America

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (February 1950)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 112–114, 144–147

Abstract: This article describes an archaeological expedition in January and February, 1948, to the Xicalongo Gulf Coast area of a district of western Campeche. The author provides descriptions of the area's flora and fauna, the hardships of the expedition, and findings of relatively new early "pre-classic" civilizations.



Area of the ancient Middle American civilizations. "Stepped pyramid" symbol indicates the location of some of the principal discovered ruined cities (ancient name in most cases unknown). Circled part is the region of the main explorations of the archaeological expedition described in this article.

AN EXPEDITION TO

CENTRAL

ARCHAEOLOGY has been aptly defined as "a rescue expedition sent into the far parts of the earth to recover the scattered pages of man's autobiography,"¹ i.e. the ruins of his ancient cities, and other material relics of his early past.

One of the "far parts of the earth" where such records have been found in especial abundance is that of the great tropical forest region of northern Central America. Here archaeological expeditions of the past hundred years have uncovered the remains of several ancient, previously unknown civilizations.

This article describes one such expedition to Central America, un-

dertaken recently, in the winter months of 1948.²

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND THE PURPOSE OF THE EXPEDITION

THIS EXPEDITION grew out of a number of important recent developments in the archaeology of Central America and of Mexico. Foremost of these has been the coming to light, in this "middle" region of the New World, of still another ancient civilization.

This newly-discovered civilization dates to an early period in the archaeological history of Middle America. Its remains have been found underlying those of the well-

¹Ann Morris, *Digging in the Southwest*, Garden City, N. Y., 1933, p. xv.
²Account taken in part from the writer's report of the expedition to the Mexican government, prepared in accordance with the expedition's archaeological contract with that government.

known classic cultures of the region such as the Maya, Zapotec, and Teotihuacan Toltec, which dates it back to the first centuries of the Christian era and the immediately preceding centuries. Evidence is mounting to the effect that it was a widespread and highly developed civilization, more or less ancestral to the classic cultures. As yet, however, its origin and people remain unknown.

The most distinctive features of this new early "pre-classic" civilization of Central America and Mexico have so far been discovered at sites located in the Gulf Coast plain of southern Veracruz and western Tabasco, in the narrow-neck-of-land region of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. It is at these sites (comprising what may be called the "Early Olmec" aspect of this civilization³), that some of the most remarkable finds in the history of American archaeology have been made. These include the earliest dated object of the New World (Stela A at Tres Zapotes in southern Veracruz, bearing a probably contemporaneous hieroglyphic date near the birth of Christ), stone sculptures and pottery figurines depicting bearded men, other figurines showing people wearing oriental-like turbans, and, most sensational of all, toy wheeled vehicles, proving the existence at one time in ancient America of knowledge of the wheel, i.e. one of the fundamentals of Old

portance of this Olmec-Gulf Coast region as an early center of the newly uncovered pre-classic civilization, raise the possibility of even more significant discoveries awaiting future archaeological research in this region. Numerous unexplored, or only partly explored, mound ruins dot the maps of this area. Though some of these sites have already been identified, usually as ceremonial centers of the well-known Classic Maya civilization (or of the Classic Olmec or "La Venta" culture), others remain entirely unclassified as to civilization or period of flourishing. Many other ancient ruined cities undoubtedly remain still hidden or undiscovered within the dense jungles of this region.

The expedition forming the subject of this article had for its main purpose an archaeological reconnaissance of one part of this region, namely the Xicalango district of western Campeche. This district was selected because it was the center of an area which was archaeologically the least explored and

least known part of the Gulf Coast region, where no distinctive centers of the pre-classic civilization had yet been discovered, and which consequently comprised an extensive break in the territorial continuity of that civilization. The reconnaissance was therefore directed toward the possible discovery of additional sites of the pre-classic civilization in this "gap area," or of other evidence linking up the discovered developments of the civilization in the Tehuantepec, Yucatan, and southern highland areas. There was also the possibility of finding evidence in this area leading to the discovery of the civilization's original or main center of development, still unlocated.

THE EXPEDITION

THIS ARCHAEOLOGICAL reconnaissance of the Xicalango Gulf Coast area was undertaken under the auspices of the Department of Archaeology of Brigham Young University. (Continued on following page)

AMERICA

By M. Wells Jakeman, Ph.D.

HEAD OF ARCHAEOLOGY DEPARTMENT
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

World civilization, which had long been denied by Americanists. The last three of these discoveries strongly bolster, of course, the extreme "migrationist" theory of ancient American origins, i.e. that the ancient civilizations of America had their ultimate origin to transoceanic migrations from some early center of civilization in the Old World.⁴

These amazing finds, and the im-

³A phase of the so-called "Olmec" development of the Gulf Coast region, to be differentiated from the succeeding "Classic Olmec" or "La Venta" phase which equates temporally with the beginnings of the Classic Maya culture of Yucatan.

⁴For further information on these recent discoveries see, e.g., Matthew W. Stirling, "Discovering the New World's Oldest Dated Work of Man," in *The National Geographic Magazine*, August 1939, and "Great Stone Faces of the Mexican Jungle," *ibid.*, September 1940; George C. Vaillant, "A Bearded Mystery," in *Natural History*, vol. 31 (1931), pp. 243-252, and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, "The Wheel in Ancient America," in *The Improvement Era*, vol. 49, (December 1946), pp. 785 and 818-819.



Expedition members on the partially uncovered stairway of an ancient pyramid temple at Aguacatal. From left to right: W. Glenn Harmon, Thomas Stuart Ferguson, the writer, and Abel Paez. Photograph taken by expedition guide Manuel Lara.

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University.⁹ The expedition members consisted of the writer, as director and archaeologist; Thomas Stuart Ferguson of Oakland, California, as transportation manager and field assistant; W. Glenn Harmon of Berkeley, California, as photographer; and Abel Paez of Mexico City, as general aide.

The members gathered at Mexico City on January 10, 1948, where final preparations were made, including the securing of the necessary governmental permit for archaeological work in Mexico. Valuable suggestions for the success of the expedition were contributed by Frans Blom of Mexico City, former director of the Middle American Research Institute of Tulane University of Louisiana, and by H. Carlos Frey, also of Mexico City, professional jungle explorer and one of the discoverers of the now famous Maya ruins of Bonampak, Chiapas. Generous assistance in obtaining the large amount of special photographic supplies required for the expedition was given by Otto Done, representative of the Eastman Kodak Stores in Mexico City.

Leaving Mexico City on January 18, the party proceeded by plane to the tropical eastern Gulf Coast island and town of Carmen, Campeche, in geographical Central America, which had been selected as the immediate base of operations. Here additional supplies

⁹As the "Second Brigham Young University Archaeological Expedition to Middle America." The first such undertaking was an exploring expedition of Brigham Young University to Central and South America in 1900, under the leadership of University president Benjamin Cluff. The expedition of 1948, however, was the first distant archaeological field project of the University to be undertaken through its recently established Department of Archaeology.



Expedition members landing—modern archaeology by air.



The Black God of the Maya holds the symbol of corn in his hands.

were obtained and arrangements made for motor launch transportation across the great inland sea of the Laguna de Términos to the Xicalango mainland. Here also much valuable information was furnished by local citizens on the known sites and antiquities of the Xicalango-Laguna de Términos region.

The area to be explored lay across the Laguna de Términos

from the Island of Carmen, on the Xicalango mainland. This is a low, flat country of jungle, swamps, and numerous small lakes or lagoons, presenting many difficulties to the explorer. Much of it is flooded in the rainy season, from June to December. This, together with the discomfort and mud caused by the incessant rains, necessarily restricts archaeological work in the area to the so-called "dry" season, from January to May, when it rains only every few days. Even in the "dry season" there are numerous stagnant swamps, leftovers from the rains, which effectively hinder exploration.

Dense jungle or low rain forest covers most of the area, especially along the shores of the lagoons, where the trees crowd even into the water, leaving no open shores or beaches except on the tide-washed Gulf coast and Xicalango coast of the Laguna de Términos. The jungle inland, however, is occasionally broken by comparatively open stretches of swamp-water and savanna-land.

The jungle itself consists mainly of coconut palms, wild *aguacates* or avocado trees, and various other tropical trees, especially mangroves, which flourish in the swamps and along the shores of the lagoons where they have the peculiarity of sending many roots out from their branches and back down into the water, forming an impenetrable barrier of tangled roots and branches fronting these shores and making landings impossible for long stretches. In the jungle inland from these mangrove thickets is an almost equally impenetrable under-

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THE IMPROVEMENT ERA



In the state of Yucatan is a massive ruin known as the Palace of Sayil, the building is low and rambling, three stories high, and about one-half block long.

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growth of thorny bushes, ferns, and wild grasses, often extending above the head. Vivid flowers abound, among which flit immense, brilliantly-hued butterflies; while the upper reaches of the forest are the home of a heavy bird population.

For what it lacks in larger animal life, the Xicalango region more than makes up in an oversupply of insect population, especially hordes of mosquitoes, chiggers, ticks, and ants.

Finally, this area is afflicted, as is other parts of Middle America, by that ancient scourge of the tropics, malaria, which constitutes the chief hazard of archaeological work in these lands.

At the present time the Xicalango region is almost totally uninhabited. Only a few lone huts and tiny settlements of coconut plantation workers break the almost-continuous wall of jungle along the shores of the lagoons. This is in marked contrast with the dense population of ancient times indicated by the archaeological findings to be described.

The few inhabitants that do manage an existence in this wilderness are mainly of native Indian stock, mostly of the Chontal branch of the ancient Mayan linguistic family, known to have been established in the Gulf Coast region from early pre-Columbian times. Despite primitive living conditions, debilitating tropical diseases, and an extremely high child mortality, these people maintain a surprisingly cheerful disposition. They were always most friendly and hospitable to the expedition party, and furnished it with reliable guides and excavation workers.

The expedition's reconnaissance of this region was accomplished by means of airplane photography, coastwise surveys by launch and dugout canoe, and finally land explorations. In the coastwise reconnaissance, important aid and information was given by Ignacio Matemala of Ciudad del Carmen, son of the owner of the *hacienda* of Xicalango and pilot of one of the launches used in the survey. A *cayuca* or native dugout, propelled with a pole by a native boatman, was used to explore

the shallow interior lagoons. Only a few landings could be made, however, because of the density of the jungle growth along the shores and the additional obstacle of shoals, along the coast of the Laguna de Términos. The means of landing on these shallow coasts from the launches was by *cayuca*, when available; otherwise landings were accomplished by the exploring party riding to shore on the shoulders of the crew. Since the expedition members all greatly out-weighted their native mounts, this method proved to be rather hazardous.

Finally, the difficult land explorations, carried out on foot through jungle and swamps, were accomplished through the guide assistance and expert machete-wielding of a native Chontal Indian worker of the *hacienda* of Xicalango, Manuel Lara, who served as expedition guide during most of the Xicalango project.

By these means, three new mound ruins were located, for the first time archaeologically (with one partial exception as noted), *viz.* Zapotal (local name, as given by Manuel

Lara, expedition guide; a group of several fairly large mounds); *Punta Gorda* (local name, as given by expedition guide; three fairly large mounds); and *Panteón* (local name, as given by Ignacio Matemala and other native informants; three small mounds).⁶ The locations of these sites, and other data resulting from this reconnaissance, have been charted on a new large-scale archaeological map of the Xicalango region to be published later in a final report of the expedition.

A general survey was also made for the first time of the known ruins of Aguacatal⁷ (discovered a few years before by a party of Mexican archaeologists). This was the work of ten days of exploration at this site, accomplished in the face of great natural difficulties. Foremost of these was the density of the jungle, which reduced observation to only a few feet in any direction, completely concealing beyond this distance the various ruin mounds comprising the site. This, together with the heavy jungle growth covering the mounds themselves, necessitated constant machete-wielding by Manuel Lara in locating and partially clearing these mounds for measurement, and made impossible more than a rough map of the ruins at this time.

Other difficulties were the tropical heat—though the season was that of our winter—and the insect pests, especially the hordes of voracious mosquitoes. Against the latter, however, the party was fortunately somewhat fortified, with repellents, head nets, mosquito hammocks, and anti-malaria drugs.⁸ Another difficulty was that caused by the heavy rains which occasionally flooded the camp, and made necessary the construction of a platform to keep the expedition's store of supplies off the ground, and a palm-thatched shelter for protection from the rain. Still another problem developed when the provisions of food and purified water from

No Liquor-Tobacco

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posed to "sale by the drink" for many reasons, some of which have been here-in previously expressed. So we have urged that all candidates for political office who would have anything to do with the making or enforcing of laws shall be asked before election for their views relative to "sales by the drink." If this matter should again come up for action by the electorate, in Utah, we hope that readers of this column will find that we continue to oppose the election of candidates favorable to methods of handling liquor that will result in greater consumption. And according to the records, greater consumption always results by increasing the number of places that have alcoholic beverages for sale, as the license system always does. To keep our environment as free from evil and evil tendencies as feasible is both a moral and religious duty, as we see it. We hope that readers of THE IMPROVEMENT ERA will always be opposed to the methods of the underworld—to those methods that result in multiplying evils or increasing the ease for participating in them.

⁶Verification of an oral report of ruins near the settlement of Xicalango recorded in the *Atlas arqueológico de la República Mexicana*, 1939, p. 20 and map.

⁷Local name, meaning 'Aguacate or Avocado-tree Plantation.'

⁸The expedition of Mexican archaeologists who first visited the site had an even more difficult time, being able to remain only one day because of the mosquitoes, as their visit occurred in May when these pests increase to still greater numbers with the beginning of the rainy season, at which time they almost succeed in driving out even the hardened native inhabitants.

Carmen gave out before the end of the scheduled work at this site, which required more days than expected. However, Manuel and his two brothers Pedro and Juan, who comprised the expedition's native crew at Aguacatal, came to the rescue by bringing in a supply of bananas and *tortillas* from their home, and by cutting down coconuts for coconut milk.

Three main groups of mounds were found at Aguacatal, in this first general survey of the site. One consists of several fairly large mounds representing the ruins of temple pyramids and foundation platforms, partially surrounding a plaza; another, a number of much smaller mound ruins of similar nature arranged in what may be a second and possibly older plaza group; and a third, several large mounds of undetermined arrangement, somewhat detached from the other two groups. The largest mound of the first group, which was designated Mound A1, measured approximately 150 ft. long by 100 ft. wide and 15 ft. high; and the highest, Mound A5, approximately 65 ft. square and 30 ft. high. The largest of the second group, Mound B1, measured approximately 45 ft. long by 30 ft. wide and 6 ft. high; and the largest of the third, which was also the highest discovered at the site, Mound C1, approximately 100 ft. square and 45 ft. high.

All of these mounds were found to have as their outermost layer—under the blanket of jungle growth—a thick, hard conglomerate of earth and oyster shells, evidently a “kitchen midden” deposit left by some shellfish-eating people who had lived on the mounds after the abandonment of the city by its original inhabitants. An exploratory trench run into the side of one of the mounds (A5) through this surface midden revealed a stepped pyramid inside. This in turn was found to enclose a still older stepped pyramid, which also, in turn, appeared to encase still another and even more ancient pyramid in a telescoping “jack-in-the-box” fashion, with the two outermost pyramids obviously representing successive enlargements of the original temple pyramid. The construction of these pyramids is of earth and shell-midden, with sloping retaining

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walls of cement or irregular stone slabs. Other brief excavations in this mound and in Mound A2 (begun by the previous Mexican archaeologists) revealed portions of stairways ascending the pyramids, built of stone block masonry.

None of the mounds at this site, so far as could be determined, had any standing building on its summit. This indicates that the buildings which must have originally surmounted these pyramids and platforms were probably constructed of wood, with thatched roofs, and have consequently long since disappeared.

The most interesting feature discovered at Aguacatal, however—perhaps, in fact, the most important discovery of the entire expedition—is a great earthen embankment with steeply sloping sides, measuring some 25 ft. wide at the base and 10 ft. wide at the top, 6 to 10 ft. high on the outer side, and 3 ft. high on the inner side, partially surrounding the first two groups of mounds and apparently terminating at the edge of the lagoon near which the ruins are situated. On the north and west, this embankment separates these groups from a swamp lying at a level several feet below that of the area of the mounds (compare the above measurements as to height on outer and inner sides). Possibly this embankment represents the remains of an ancient dyke, built to protect the city from the flooding waters of the swamp in the rainy season; or, alternatively, an ancient wall fortification.

In the course of this survey, and the Xicalango reconnaissance in general, a surface collection of several hundred ancient potsherds was also obtained. This was augmented by subsurface samplings from a stratigraphic test trench in the plaza of Group A at Aguacatal. The processing of the pottery material (in camp and at Ciudad del Carmen) completed the field work of the expedition in the Xicalango region as originally projected.*

There still remained, however, a number of supplementary projects

*A description and classification of this material will be presented in the final report. It is mainly on the basis of ceramic evidence that the affiliations and chronology of the ancient settlements of the Xicalango region have been worked out.

of the expedition. One of these was a voyage by launch up the remote Palizadas River (one of the distributaries of the Usumacinta, in the main region of jaguars and poisonous serpents) and the series of jungle-rimmed lakes by which this river enters the Laguna de Términos. This acquainted the party with the main route of water travel from the Gulf of Mexico into the interior "Usumacinta province" of the Maya area, along which ancient civilization probably spread; and also with the nature of the country in the heart of the archaeologically little-known eastern Gulf Coast area.

Following this exploration, and a visit to the archaeological site of Huaraxé on the Island of Carmen, a trip by plane was made to northern Yucatan, for a brief study also of the famous ruined Maya cities of Uxmal and Chichen Itza.

On the return flight from Yucatan, a stop of several days was made at Minatitlan, in the Tehuantepec Isthmus area of the "Olmec" sites of the pre-Classic civilization, where there are also known to be many unexplored mound ruins. Working out of Minatitlan, an air photographic study by cub plane was made of the Gulf side of the Isthmus and the nearby Tuxtla Mountains (a cloud-capped, heavily forested mountain wilderness, still largely unknown archaeologically), as far as the northernmost discovered "Olmec" site of Tres Zapotes.

From Minatitlan the party continued by plane up the coast to Veracruz City, thence inland past snow-capped Orizaba and other high peaks of the Sierra Madre Oriental, and so back to Mexico City. Here several more days were spent in a preliminary classification of the pottery material obtained in the Xicalango-Aguacatal survey, on the basis partly of a comparative study of collections in the National Museum. This final "field" task was completed on February 21, at which point the expedition terminated.

RESULTS

IT MAY be stated, in conclusion, that the expedition's purposes were generally achieved. Not only were several new sites discovered in Xicalango Gulf Coast region, but

also many additional temple pyramids and other ancient structures at the already-discovered ruins of Aguacatal, and the first general survey of that site accomplished.¹⁰

These new discoveries, moreover, established the fact that this region was heavily populated in ancient times by a civilized city and temple-building people; and that the settlement of Aguacatal in particular, in view of the relatively large number and size of its temples, pyramids, and other structures, including the possible wall fortification, was probably the principal or capital city of the district in those times.¹¹

On the other hand, none of these Xicalango sites can be said—at least on the basis of this preliminary exploration—to have been the original or main center of the pre-classic civilization. Nor was any evidence found which might lead us to the discovery of this center.

From the indication of certain architectural features, however, (such as the absence of standing stone buildings) and the identified ceramic styles, it may be concluded that the settlement at least of Aguacatal belongs (in its earliest and main period) to the pre-classic civilization. This therefore increases the number of known sites in the eastern Gulf Coast area establishing the territorial continuity of the pre-classic civilization through this region, from the "Early Olmec" aspect in the Isthmus region to the closely-related "Early Maya" development in Yucatan.¹²

Other results of the expedition will be described in the final report, along with plans now under way for another expedition to Central America, within a year or two of this writing, including an extensive project of further excavation at the important site of Aguacatal.¹³

¹⁰Besides the notes, drawings, still photographs, and other detailed records of the expedition's findings, several thousand feet of colored motion pictures were also obtained, providing a general film record of the expedition, for use especially in archaeology classes at Brigham Young University studying field methods of archaeology in Central America and other tropical lands.

¹¹It should be noted that the ancient name of Aguacatal is unknown.

¹²See the introductory section on the purpose of the expedition. A few other sites besides Aguacatal are also now known in this area as belonging to the pre-classic civilization.

¹³To be published in "Bulletin No. 2" of the University Archaeological Society, affiliate organization of the Department of Archaeology of Brigham Young University. A copy of this final bulletin report, and of other publications of the University Archaeological Society and the Department, may be obtained through membership in the Society. For information on the conditions of membership address the Department of Archaeology, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.



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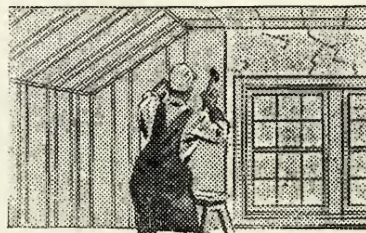
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